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'BY THE GRACE OF GOD, WE'RE ALL HERE'



Cedar Park police officer Nik Anderson was released from St. David's Round Rock Medical Center on Aug. 19, 2020, after being shot a few days earlier. Three Cedar Park police officers were wounded answering a call on Aug. 16, 2020.

LOLA GOMEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN FILE

Cedar Park officers recount being shot, surviving standoff

Tony Plohetski Austin American-Statesman | USA TODAY NETWORK



Nik Anderson, a Cedar Park police officer, and Jackie Quiles, a former Cedar Park officer, pose in front of the Cedar Park Police Department's headquarters in March. They were injured, along with a third officer, in a 2020 shooting.

AARON E. MARTINEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

What Cedar Park police officer Nik Anderson misses most about being able to fully use his left arm is the way he used to hug his three kids.

"I'm trying to move from having two arms to one, basically," he said.

On Aug. 16, 2020, Anderson and two fellow officers survived a hailstorm of bullets from the gun of a mentally ill man who had taken his mother and two siblings hostage. When they arrived on scene, the three officers said they had little information — only that the hostage-taker had access to a gun and his family members were cowering, terrified inside their home.

The officers had two potentially deadly options: wait for backup and a negotiator, which might allow the gunman time to kill his hostages; or intervene swiftly, potentially escalating the situation, but hopefully saving the man's family.

The officers took the second option. A gunfight and 16-hour standoff ensued. The police sustained injuries, but lived to tell about that harrowing day. The gunman's family members

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PROJECT CONNECT



A rendering depicts the shared-use path that would be included in both options presented for the design of a bridge that would bring CapMetro's light rail Blue Line across Lady Bird Lake. PROVIDED

Estimated price tag jumps by \$4.5 billion

Officials blame inflation and issues with tunnel

Madi Donham and Sarah Asch

Austin American-Statesman
USA TODAY NETWORK

When Austin voters were asked in 2020 to approve a local tax increase to pay for the massive transportation infrastructure plan dubbed Project Connect, they were told the project's estimated cost would be \$7.1 billion.

Less than two years later, local transportation officials now say the estimated cost for the project has ballooned by an additional \$4.5 billion, putting the estimated price tag now at about \$11.6 billion.

Higher prices for acquiring property and surging inflation that has driven up costs for materials and labor are partly to blame, local transportation officials say. But in a memo to the Austin City Council, Project Connect's managers also say the cost for a proposed tunnel under Lady Bird Lake has

See CONNECT, Page 11A



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A 16-hour standoff ensued in August 2020 outside a house on Natalie Cove in Cedar Park's Heritage Park subdivision after three officers were shot there.

PHOTOS BY JAY JANNER/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Standoff

Continued from Page 1A

survived, and he remains in custody as courts assess his competency for trial.

More than 20 months later, the incident haunts both the officers, who recently shared their account with the American-Statesman, and the man's mother, Pasha Taylor, who said her son is mentally ill. She is still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"These police officers should have never been hurt," she said. "Me and my children should have never endured what we had to endure."

The drama that forever changed their lives unfolded just three months after George Floyd died in Minneapolis police



Law enforcement officers work at the scene of a shooting in the Heritage Park subdivision in Cedar Park on Aug. 16, 2020.

custody in May 2020, sparking a national debate over law enforcement reform.

Law enforcement critics called for funding cuts, for revamped training and for officers to treat citizens, particularly people of color, as humans who might need help instead of as enemy combatants. Many police supporters called the rage unwarranted and feared that officers would face violence and retaliation.

Policing experts say what can get lost in the heated argument, though, is the often gray area in which police operate, where officers face complicated, quickly evolving situations and human lives are at stake.

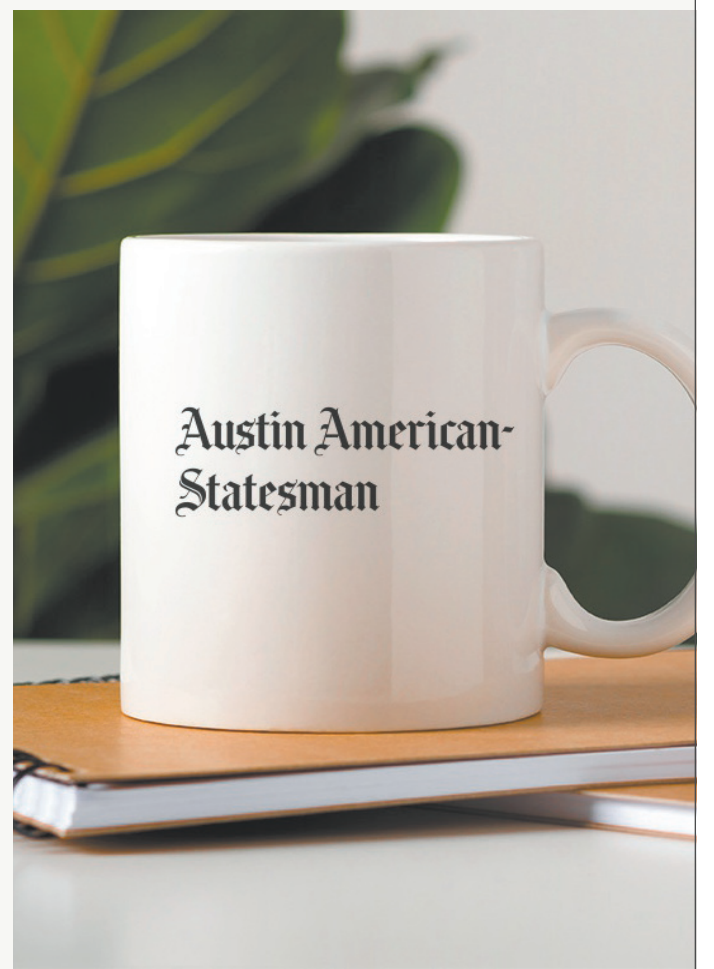
The Cedar Park officers, along with several policing and legal experts, say

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reforms remain essential to rebuilding trust between law enforcement and communities. But, they suggest, this case is a stark reminder of why officers must be prepared to confront dangerous, armed suspects.

"We have got to find ways to do things better, and those are perfectly legitimate concerns," said Howard Williams, a Texas State University lecturer in the school of criminal justice, former Austin police commander, former San Marcos police chief and a national policing consultant. "But sometimes there is a need for somebody to say, 'We have to put an end to this.'"

Bobby Taylor, an Austin civil rights attorney who has represented victims of excessive police force for 50 years, said he has seen many cases in which police moved too quickly and aggressively. But, he acknowledged, officers must know how to respond to clear danger.

"The officer's primary concern has to be with safeguarding those who request assistance," he said. "An officer is given a gun for a reason. That is to be prepared for any and all situations."

A call, then gunshots

Anderson had only been at work about 40 minutes that Sunday afternoon when he was dispatched to respond to a 911 call from Pasha Taylor's home, about 2.5 miles from police headquarters. Officers Jackie Quiles and Cris Hester followed quickly behind.

Cedar Park police will not release a copy of Pasha Taylor's 911 call or documents related to the case, including the officers' body camera videos, because of the ongoing criminal case. Taylor can't recall the entire conversation, but told the Statesman that she informed the operator that she believed her son was having a mental health crisis and that he had a gun.

As the three officers arrived at the home, Anderson said a dispatcher told them that Pasha Taylor and her children were in a locked bedroom and that her son, Joseph Taylor, was trying to bust through. Dispatchers did not relay information about the gunman's mental health history, Anderson said.

"There are exigent circumstances to enter the house to try to stop someone from getting hurt," he said. "That was our whole objective."

The officers soon realized a sectional



Cedar Park police officer Nik Anderson has had four surgeries on his arm since being shot. PROVIDED BY CEDAR PARK POLICE DEPARTMENT

sofa blocked the home's entrance. Hester used his 280-pound frame to push the door open.

Hester and Quiles followed Anderson up the stairs. They said they heard a woman screaming. As they entered a bedroom where Joseph Taylor was holding his family, the officers said, he opened fire.

Anderson, 39, took a shot to his left

arm.

"It felt in the moment like someone hit you with a baseball bat, knocking you backwards," Anderson said. "You really don't feel the pain. You just feel the pressure."

As a hail of bullets continued, all three officers returned fire. Anderson crawled to a bedroom and laid on his back as bullets whizzed past.

"I thought he was dead at that point," Hester said.

Quiles, a former medic, and Hester said they tried to reach Anderson. They were blocked by repeated rounds: "It was just more gunfire, more gunfire, more gunfire," Quiles said.

As Quiles and Hester tried to retreat by moving down the stairs on their backs, they also took fire.

Quiles was shot in her bulletproof vest, grazing her ribcage.

Hester felt blood running down his face and realized a bullet had grazed the top of his head.

"Just hearing other stories about people getting struck in the head, and still not realizing how bad it was, but still passing away, it struck me," he said.

Once outside, they said, more rounds came from a window of the home into Quiles' police SUV as they got inside the vehicle and sped away toward a nearby ambulance. Anderson eventually escaped when the gunfire subsided.

For the next 16 hours, Joseph Taylor remained with his mother, sister and brother inside the house as police negotiated for him to come out. He released his siblings first, then an hour later, walked out of the house with his mother. Pasha Taylor declined to discuss details of that day because of her son's pending case. She did not dispute the officers' account.

The gray area for officers

What Anderson and his colleagues didn't know as they walked up to Taylor's home was that he had a history of mental illness episodes that had resulted in police intervention.

In September 2019, Cedar Park police arrested him for allegedly choking his 15-year-old brother. Prosecutors dropped the case because they said family members would not testify against Joseph Taylor. Pasha Taylor said her younger son was not choked.

In June 2020, six weeks before the gunfight in Cedar Park, Houston police said Joseph Taylor shot at his father. No one was hit, but a neighbor called 911 after a bullet hit his car.

Pasha Taylor said she had tried repeatedly to get mental health treatment for her son but that agency after agency told her they could not help if he was not willing. She declined to provide his diagnosis.

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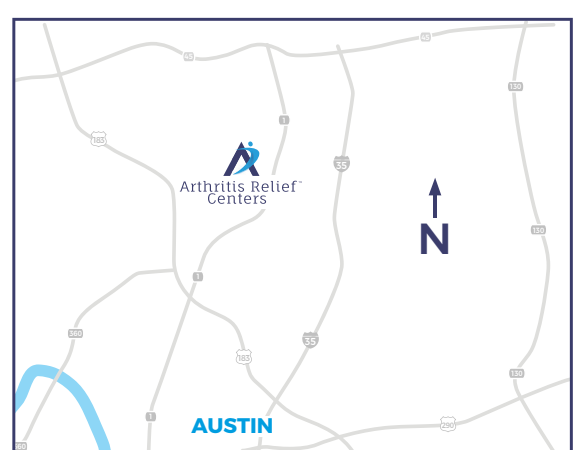
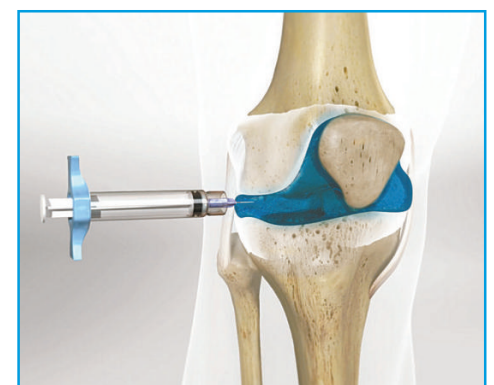
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Police work at the scene where three Cedar Park officers were shot on Aug. 16, 2020. The standoff ended the next morning when the suspect surrendered and released his family unharmed. PHOTOS BY LOLA GOMEZ/AMERICAN-STATESMAN FILE

Continued from Page 21A

Policing experts say the case highlights how officers — sometimes operating with only partial information about the people they come into contact with — must often straddle a quickly changing line between trying to save the lives of others, including those who might be dangerous, and their own lives. That reality, they argue, is critical in the debate over reform.

David Klinger, a University of Missouri-St. Louis criminology and criminal justice professor, said even when officers are well-trained, what happens in reality often deviates from training exercises.

“They have to be ready for anything from a compliant individual to ‘I’m going to try to kill you,’” Klinger said. “That is a piece that sometimes the general public doesn’t understand. We know that in some small percentage of the time, bullets are going to start flying.”

Shooting aftermath

Since the shooting, the officers said they have replayed what happened, especially as their profession has come under public scrutiny. They are relieved that Taylor was not hurt when they returned fire.

Long before the nation’s attention turned to Minneapolis in Floyd’s death, Anderson, who has been an officer for a decade, said he already was considering what he could do to build better trust between officers and citizens. He said he encouraged fellow officers to consid-

er whether charges were necessary for people who have small amounts of drugs and reminded them of how an arrest can torpedo a person’s entire life.

But when responding to calls, officers must be ready for any result, he said.

“We don’t want to think negatively, but every call we go to has the possibility of turning extremely dangerous,” Anderson said.

“There is a lot of gray, and there are legitimate dangers that come with the job,” Hester added. “You are always thinking and processing how we can do things safely — and not just safely for us, but for everyone involved.”

In the end, they said they were satisfied that they could not have performed differently that day in August 2020. Their supervisors, including Chief Mike Harmon, agree. However, the Police Department has not officially concluded its internal review of the entire incident.

Pasha Taylor no longer lives in the house where the shooting happened. Several friends helped her repair the extensive damage to her home before she moved. She visits her son in the Williamson County Jail as often as possible.

She said that although she wishes that the day would have unfolded differently, “I don’t know what was in their minds. I would have hoped they would have talked us out, negotiated us out, but they didn’t know what was going on inside, and I have to put myself in their shoes,” she said.

That night, Hester, 41, who remains with the department, and Quiles, 31, were treated and released from the hos-

pital. They were off duty for about a month each to recover, but eventually returned to work. Quiles has since left the Cedar Park department and is working as a Williamson County sheriff’s deputy.

Anderson has had four surgeries on his arm. He said he doesn’t know whether he will be able to return to the patrol work he once loved. Routine daily things like lifting a gallon of milk into the refrigerator are difficult, if not im-

possible.

Anderson said he has no ill feelings toward Joseph Taylor, who he said he hopes gets the mental health treatment he needs.

When he looks at the wounds to his arm and the memories of that day flash into his mind, he is grateful he is still able to hug his children, even if the embraces are different than before.

“By the grace of God, we’re all here,” Anderson said.



Cedar Park Police Officer Nik Anderson as he is being released from St. David’s Round Rock Medical Center on Aug. 19, 2020.

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